

**CONSUMERS - AN EXPLORATORY ASSESSMENT****Vegheș Călin***Academia de Studii Economice din București, Facultatea de Marketing, Bd. Dacia nr. 41, sector 1, cod 010404, București, c\_veghes@yahoo.com, 0744673862***Pantea Carmen***Academia de Studii Economice din București, Facultatea de Administrarea Afacerilor (cu predare în limbi străine), Str. Mihail Moxa 5-7, sector 1, cod 010961, București, pantea.carmen@gmail.com, 0729505705*

*Initially developed in order to allow human interactions in the virtual environment as online communities of people having common concerns and willing to share and exchange ideas, today social networks represent one of the online marketing tools with the highest potential employed aiming to maintain and enhance the relationships with the consumers having common interests and activities. Used daily by millions of consumers, the web-based social networks have provided an informal, personal and close to the consumer way of communication and sharing information.*

*The paper assesses in an exploratory manner the reasons determining the consumers to join and the activities conducted through the participation in a social network at a level of sample including respondents from what probably is the core segment of social networks users.*

*Keywords: social networks, online marketing, Romanian consumer*

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**Introduction**

Nowadays people's lives change very fast and the entire world seems to have a new shape from one day to another. That is the reason why the business environment and the companies need to be open minded in order not to lose ground in their competitors' favor. Each business person knows that it is important to adapt to the requirements of the changing market he operates in, if he wants to succeed. This is the reason why companies should adjust the instruments they use in order to attract new customers or to maintain the relationships with the existing ones.

It is known the fact that we live in a world where technology achieved a leading position, together with one of the most used devices, the computer, and in strong connection with the internet. This is the why companies have considered the online marketing and its tools as being very efficient in promoting their company and their products and services. They use all possible methods and instruments in order to communicate online: from email marketing, online advertising, search engine optimization, sponsored links or advergaming (which are intended to drive the user to the company's website) to e-newsletters, instant messaging, blogs and RSS feed, forums and online discussion groups and social networks (which are mostly used in order to maintain and develop relationships with the consumers).

The last ones mentioned are online marketing tools that can be used within the online communities. Those communities have appeared in order to allow human interactions in the virtual environment and proved to become important facilitators of social networking.

**Literature review**

Early in history there were attributed different definitions to the term of *community*; Hillery (1955) and Bell, Newby (1971) have given it a set of technical uses, while Willie (2000) emphasized the use of this concept in relation with social interactions, geographic areas and common bonding. Individuals and organizations acknowledged that the internet provides a low-cost environment and a place where they can meet and interact with each other and so, the phenomenon of online communities appeared and developed. They were defined as a collective group of entities, individuals or organizations that come together either temporarily or permanently through an electronic medium to interact in a common problem or interest space (Plant, 2004). Further in his paper, Plant (2004) identifies a three-dimensional model for the online community space: the degree of community regulation (unregulated and regulated communities), the degree of community openness to membership (open and private) and the degree to which a community is involved in profit activities (for-profit, not-for-profit and communities that overlap the for-profit or the not-for-profit regulated spaces).

The boost in the usage of the internet, the development of the online communities as well as the CGC (consumer generated content) are three of the main factors that influenced the launching and development of social networking. If is to consider that the online communities are the basis of social networking, since people can not network if they do not belong to a group, to a community, than the emergence of the social media, defined as a variety of new sources of online information that are created, initiated, circulated and used by consumers intent on educating each other about products, brands, services, personalities, and issues (Blackshaw and Nazzaro, 2006), has changed the way organizations communicate with customers and played a significant role in the development of the social networks.

It is to be mentioned the fact that in our research we have made a difference between the concepts of *social networks* and *social networking*. Social networking satisfies the need of the individuals to be connected in the online environment and it aims to facilitating information, knowledge, experience, opinions and documents sharing, as well as to serve entertainment or transactional purposes. Social networks (or social network sites), together with the blogs, RSS feeds, forums, discussion groups, podcasts and wikis are online marketing tools that the internet provides which have as main objective to ease social networking. Social networks have been defined by Boyd and Ellison (2007) as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site.

Compete.com has posted on the company's blog top 25 of the most accessed social networks in February 2008, by the US internet users, and the first positions were occupied by myspace.com (65.744.241 monthly visitors), facebook.com (28.563.983 monthly visitors) and classmates.com (11.978.068 monthly visitors); hi5.com, linkedin.com and tagged.com being ranked on the 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, respectively 10<sup>th</sup> position. In the following year, there were listed the most used social networks in terms of monthly visitors and visits, by the US internet users; facebook.com has taken the lead (68.557.534 monthly visitors and 1.191.373.339 monthly visits), being followed by myspace.com (58.555.800 monthly visitors) and it is surprising to find on the 3<sup>rd</sup> position twitter.com (5.979.052 monthly visitors), since in February 2008 it was situated only on the 22<sup>nd</sup> place (629.531 monthly visitors); hi5.com has lost ground, being situated on the 15<sup>th</sup> rank, while linkedin.com and tagged.com have achieved the 5<sup>th</sup> and respectively 6<sup>th</sup> position. According to comeScore.com, at the level of Europe, facebook.com has been accessed by about 99.776.000 unique visitors in February 2009, as compared with February 2008 when there were only approximately 24.110.000 unique visitors; facebook.com is the most preferred and accessed social network in most of the European countries.

### Methodological Notes

The specific objectives to be reached through the present exploratory research approach referred to the main aspects concerning the social networks: the associated degree of awareness, participation within, reasons of participation and behavioral patterns related to the social networks. Questions concerning the social networks and networking had represented only a specialized part inside of a consistent questionnaire approaching all the tools consumers are exposed through the online marketing campaigns conducted in the market. Data have been collected online in March-April 2009. The sample has included 124 respondents (61 male and 63 females), aged 18 to 29, from Bucharest. Focus on this category, called in the marketing literature and better known as the Generation Y, is motivated by the significantly higher penetration and, respectively usage of the internet and, particularly of the social networks at the level of affiliated consumers.

### Major Findings

Social networks seem to be characterized by an awareness of 100% as all the respondents have answered indicating that they know about at least one network. The best in terms of the awareness networks are Hi5 (mentioned by 119 respondents representing 96.0% of the investigated sample) and Facebook (102, respectively 82.3%). It is important to specify that the awareness of social networks, as it has been defined in the context of this research approach, refers to the assisted (and not spontaneous) awareness. MySpace has a relatively good awareness among the respondents being mentioned by two-thirds of the investigated sample while Netlog appears to be characterized through an average degree of awareness (with almost a half of the sample recognizing it).

Group of the less-known social networks includes LinkedIn, Noi2, Ringo, respectively Delicious and some other networks (Ce-faci.ro, Ingeri.ro, Last.fm, Neogen, Twitter). This situation can be explained due to the certain degree of specialization of the network (Neogen) or the fact that some of these networks are Romanian (Ce-faci.ro).

**Table 1. Social networks awareness and participation at the level of the investigated sample**

Social Networks	Awareness		Participation	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Delicious	9	7.3	2	1.6
Facebook	102	82.3	45	36.3
Hi5	119	96.0	102	82.3
LinkedIn	23	18.5	6	4.8
MySpace	84	67.7	20	16.1
Netlog	56	45.2	20	16.1
Noi2	22	17.7	4	3.2
Ringo	22	17.7	1	0.8
Other	5	4.0	4	3.2

**Notes:** "Other" includes Ce-faci.ro, Ingeri.ro, Last.fm, Neogen, Twitter (in the case of awareness), respectively DeviantArt, Ingeri.ro, Last.Fm, Twitter (in the case of participation); networks arranged alphabetically.

Participation in the social networks appears to be maybe too low if is to consider as reference the awareness of these networks. With the exception of Hi5, with an impressive weight of the respondents owing and using a profile (82.3%), all the other networks are less used at the level of the investigated sample.

Connecting the awareness and the participation in the social networks it can be determined an indicator of penetration of the social networks as a weight of the profile owners in the total number of respondents that have heard about a certain social network. The highest degree of awareness, as well as the highest weight of the respondents having a profile makes Hi5 the social network with the best penetration rate (85.7%) followed at a significant distance by Facebook (44.1%) and Netlog (35.7%).

LinkedIn (26.1%), MySpace (23.8%), Delicious (22.2%) and even Noi2 (18.2%) form a group characterized by a rather poor penetration while Ringo (4.5 %) appears to be the network with the poorest both awareness and participation.

Participation within a social network can be motivated by different factors. Probably, the most important one is that referring to the social aspects of the respondents' day-to-day life – communication with the friends and / or relatives, dating and / or flirting, making new friends, while the second in terms of importance refers to the entertainment and informational role associated to this online marketing tool – enjoying different things, online gaming, and getting interesting information about different products, services, brands, events, etc., see Table 2).

**Table 2. Reasons for participating in the social networks at the level of the investigated sample**

Reasons	Frequency	Percentage
Communication with friends	81	65.3
Dating / flirting	9	7.3
Enjoying different things	56	45.2
Getting interesting information	24	19.4
Making new friends	43	34.7
Online gaming	17	13.7
Personal branding	19	15.3
Relationship with business partners	5	4.0
Supporting public persons	5	4.0
Supporting products, organizations, campaigns	4	3.2

Social networks seem to be very close in achieving their mission, at least at the level of the generation Y, as two-thirds of the respondents use them as a communication platform with friends. The *networking side* of the social networks employment appears to be illustrated by the respondents' desire to make new friends, which represents a reason to participate within a social network for one-third of the respondents, or even through using the connections in the more sensitive area of the personal relations for dating and flirting. The *social side* of the social networks employment is less visible as a determinant reason for participation in a network: the desire to support the public persons, products, organizations and campaigns is characteristic for a minority of the respondents.

Infotainment, a combination of spending the time in a pleasant and, in the same time, useful way, appears to provide a relatively strong motivation for accessing and participating the social networks: almost a half of the respondents seek to enjoy the content available within the network, one out of five search for interesting information and one out of seven play online network games.

Personal branding represents another interesting reason for participation in the social networks. The percentage of respondents that have mentioned the possibility to build or enhance their personal brand can be explained, on a hand, through the intrinsic opportunities offered by the social networks (from which the most important may be the access to a community of people sharing the same interests, beliefs, and lifestyle) and, on the other hand, a kind of replication of the businesslike behavior (participation in a social network may be of the same importance for an individual like having a website for an organization).

Relationships with business partners represent a reason for accessing and participating in the social network for a small minority of respondents. The results can be explained by the demographic profile of the respondents (that are, probably, too young to have business partners and to manage communication or other type of relationships with them) and by the relatively limited employment of the social networks for business-related purposes (and when happening, this is possible in specialized networks such as LinkedIn).

What are the respondents doing using social networks? Searching for old friends (and, probably, making new ones) represents the main type of activity conducted through the participation within a social network, as more than a half of the investigated sample does this (see Table 3). One-third of the respondents use the social networks to deliver the community their ideas, to discuss and exchange them even, for one out of ten respondents, inside more specialized networks (comparable with the special interest groups).

**Table 3. Behavioral patterns within the social networks at the level of the investigated sample**

Patterns	Frequency	Percentage
Accessing commercial links	16	12.9
Activating in thematic networks	12	9.7
Delivering/exchanging ideas	41	33.1
Searching for a job	14	11.3
Searching old friends	68	54.8
Self-promoting the profile	35	28.2
Supporting a/an brand/person, event	6	4.8

Self-promotion of the personal profile appears to be important for almost one out of three respondents and this may be seen in connection with the opportunities for personal branding as a reason for participating in a social network. Accessing the commercial links and searching for a job represent activities done by slightly more than one out of ten respondents suggesting that although there is an important potential in these directions, the social networks have, like the concept itself implies, a rather social and not a business and / or commercial dimension.

### **Conclusions and Future Directions of Research**

Of course, it is difficult to draw conclusions about the social networks development and employment after an exploratory research approach conducted at the level of a rather specific group of consumers. The results of the study are significantly limited by the nature of the sample and this should be one of the further improvements to be made in terms of the research methodology. Another important limit of the study is represented by the orientation of the questions towards the obvious aspects of the existence and employment of the social networks.

Still, there are several facts that have been observed based on the results provided by this exploratory approach:

- awareness of the social networks seems to follow the same pattern at the level of the investigated sample with that registered worldwide: Hi5, Facebook and MySpace are the most well-known networks for the Bucharest, 18-29 years old respondents;
- there is a significant distance between being aware of a social network and owning an account and participating effectively within the network. Hi5 is the social network with the best penetration rate followed at a significant distance by Facebook and Netlog;
- social networks seem to be very close in accomplishing their mission being used mainly as a communication platform. The *networking side* of the networks employment is more visible while the *social side* appears less important as a determinant reason for participation in a network;
- communication with the friends and / or relatives, enjoying different things, and making new friends are the main reasons for accessing the social networks; while maintaining a relationship with business partners, and supporting public persons, products, organizations and campaigns represent peripheral motivators for joining and participating within the social networks;
- searching for old friends, delivering and exchanging ideas, and self-promotion of the personal profile represents the main type of activities while supporting brands, persons, and / or events is the least conducted one through the participation within a social network. The social networks have, like the concept itself implies, a rather social and not a business and / or commercial dimension.

Further directions of research to be considered refer to the:

- expanding the dimension of the investigated population through getting out from Bucharest and covering the whole country (including the urban and rural areas), respectively through extending the demographic profile of the sample covering not only the group aged 18-29, but also consumers from other categories (at least members of the active population);
- increasing the complexity of the information generated through the research by introducing supplementary questions about joining, participating and the experiences registered within the social networks and also through the analysis conducted at the level of sub-samples including users of the main social networks.

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